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Miscellaneous Works and 'Bad Home Movies'.

The third DVD of Kurt Kren's films as published by *Index* contains a miscellany of work that fits into neither the structural-themed first disc nor the documentation of Material Aktionen by Mühl, Brus and others of the second. Some of the films are discussed by Barnaby Dicker (*Tausendjahrekino* and *Snapspots (for Bruce)*) and myself (*Venecia Kaputt, No Film*) in separate essays in this volume. Of the remainder, closer examination reveals that there are several interesting themes, preoccupations and connections with the films on the other discs, even if the films in themselves are not always as strong.

The aesthetic negativity and terse cultural critique of Kren's oeuvre is evident in much of the work. *22/69 Happy End* consists of fragments of formulaic Hollywood movies – sword and sandal Epics, Biblical dramas, Thrillers and Westerns. These are glimpsed as accelerated, black and white fragments, filmed blind off the screen in several different cinemas, turning the most hidebound, generic forms into more or less abstract light play. The speed gives the general impression of blurred imagery, punctuated by sombreros and faces, sometimes just about recognizable as Charlton Heston or John Wayne. *Happy End* seems to offer something like the experience of seeing twenty-four different images every second so that one has the sensation of experiencing an all but ungraspable flow of diverse images. The speed is much too fast to permit one to follow any dramatic action. Thus the films are deprived of the continuity that is at the heart of their kinetic economy. These sequences, which form the bulk of the film, are punctuated by four brief sexually explicit shots. The close-up shots of intercourse, presumably supply the film's titular 'happy end': a substitute, firstly for the happy endings that the movies normally supply, and secondly for real sex, whose representation here is perfunctory and banal, rendered in ugly grey tones. The ugliness is a kind of measure of the distance between observing and participating. It also suggests that while it is entirely normal to watch action movies, as opposed to participating in the activities represented therein, the same

disposition in relation to represented and actual sex is considered perverse. The final brief image of conjoined genitalia at rest is a blunt metaphor for the anti-climactic banality of most Hollywood conclusions.

Like *Schatzi, 24/70 Western* is composed from a re-filmed single photographic image, in this case a poster showing the mutilated bodies of victims of the My Lai massacre, shot in extreme close-up. At first sight the images appear to be pornographic, until one recognizes the glimpses of piled up flesh as the naked limbs and torsos of babies and adults. The title is surely ironic, a reference to the Western genre, with its celebration of the rapacious conquest of the American West, here extended and updated to the Vietnam War's westernization of the 'East'. *Western's* images seem all the more shocking for our only being able to glimpse them.

The film ends with another Kren trope. What seems at first to be an apparently unrelated and extremely brief high angle shot of two figures walking in a suburban location of unpaved road, timber framed houses and back gardens, invites us to make connections between this mundane, tranquil setting and the evidence of the horrendous violence displayed in the poster, violence whose exposure through the mass media helped to speed the USA's chaotic withdrawal from South East Asia.

27/71 Auf der Pfaueninsel (familien film) significantly extends Kren's practice of making films with titles that are sometimes longer than the images they precede, such as *No Film* and *Venecia Kaputt*, which are also discussed here, in effect blurring the distinction between the two. The opening credits, consisting of the names of the people who will appear - Günter Brus, family members and friends - plus the regular 'copyright kren' and 'ende' cards, run for just over one minute, while the film itself lasts twenty-three seconds. There are twice as many title cards as image shots: ten of the former. Of the latter, the first is effectively a reiteration of the 'günter brus' title card, since it shows Brus forming his own name from that of a similar one - Martin Brunshus - printed on the back of a tourist coach, which he achieves by obscuring some letters of the operator's name with his hands. This is followed by two near-identical mid-shots of Brus looking into an animal enclosure, separated by

a jump cut. The fourth is a haphazard, hand-held, diagonally framed angle on some trees, while the fifth follows the adult group from behind, while in the foreground Brus plays a kind of game with a young girl by walking around her in circles. The camera half-follows his movements, before the film abruptly ends.

The extreme brevity of *Auf der Pfaueninsel* and the small number of its shots raise the question why there are two near-identical ones of Brus. From a conventional point of view, one of the two is obsolete: meaningless, and a negation of what shots are supposed to be and do, which is to contribute something to the film as a whole. By inserting an unnecessary shot into what is already a scant and cursory structure, Kren undermines his own logic, since without it the film can be read as a home movie of a day in the park. Kren thus creates something almost abstract with respect to the shot's second appearance, since the information provided by the first is easily absorbed, leaving the second to be read as a configuration of light and shadow that appears as a man in a park. If this is going too far, the repeat at least hints at a putative looping, a device that would similarly put the two shots at odds with the rest of the work. On the other hand, he could have created an entire film of shots of Brus looking into an animal enclosure, in which case each would testify to the inexhaustible variations that produce something slightly different each time, thereby redeeming the redundancy of the second shot. The repeated shot hints at this possibility without enacting it. Thus Kren plants a thought-provoking device in what is otherwise an utterly banal sequence.

33/77 Keine Donau is perhaps Kren's most technically ambitious film, ranking with *31/75 Asyl* and *37/78 Tree Again* as a work that tests the medium's technology to its limits. Like those other films it is also a highly risky experiment. Where *Tree Again* was shot on out of date infrared film, meaning that there was no guarantee of an image, the demands of making *Keine Donau's* led to the failure of Kren's Pathé camera on account of the multiple rewinding and in-camera superimposition. The film was achieved only at the fourth attempt (with a clockwork Bolex) and comprises thirteen exposures, on a single strip of 16mm celluloid. Each exposure involved the same framing of a view of the backs of houses and apartment buildings in Vienna,

but was made at a different focus setting. This results in varying degrees of mis-registration and hence blurring, since a change of focus also affects the size of the various forms within the shot. Thus focus is everywhere and nowhere. The result is an image that is sometimes translucent and shimmering; at other moments it has a unique density of colour and matter, as if the layers accumulate to create an impenetrable material depth. This is one of Kren's most beautiful films, punctuated by frequent, stunning jumps in colour and atmosphere, as a result of having been shot in a variety of wintery weathers.

34/77 Tschibo is animated from notebook pages from the years 1970 to 77. Each year is indicated by a title. The film brings a shooting system of frame numbers, determined as in several of his other works by the Fibonacci series, into conjunction with a variable but homogeneous subject - Kren's handwriting, sketches and diagrams. The short sequences of pages are frequently interspersed by blurred single frames of what looks like a fast tilt down an unidentifiable surface. Thus lively movement is generated from the variable and fortuitous sequencing of similar pages of writing on the one hand, while on the other hand actual movement is frozen in the single blurred frames. Because they are single frames they cannot generate a movement on their own, but rather they punctuate, or interrupt, the animated pages. The image occasionally jumps into a more continuous and fluid mode when the camera comes across some shooting diagrams for other films, though it is not possible to identify what these are. *Tschibo* is a testament to the unstoppable way in which any conjunction of most kinds of single images (the monochromatic frames of 'flicker films' being the only absolute exception) will coalesce as apparent movement. Similarly to *Western*, Kren inserts another unrelated image into *Tschibo* shortly before it ends, this time a much more cryptic view of traffic in a night-time cityscape. One link might be in the limited range of colours of both the notebook pages and the traffic shot; another might be the film's cycle of stop/go motion.

39/81 Which way to CA? traces Kren's journey from the east to the western USA in mostly mid-toned black and white. Although shot with a hand-held camera and both humorous and casual in terms of its subject and general approach, the film is

nevertheless full of carefully composed shots of Kren's car in a variety of locations. In effect it's a self-portrait cum travelogue in which the car replaces the human subject. Kren described this film and others like it, made during his time in the US, as 'bad home movies'. The shot of Japanese tourists posing for a photograph at the official spot at the southern end of the Golden Gate Bridge anticipates his last film *50/96 Snapshots for Bruce*, which is composed entirely of such images, though made in Vienna. As in *Auf der Pfaueninsel*, there are pairs of near-identical shots, but they operate very differently in this film, where they show the front of Kren's car protruding into the left half of the frame. This device is reprised again in *40/81 Breakfast in Grauen*, which begins with documentation of young people making a movie on a rubbish tip, followed by sequences of a group of bearded men eating among piles of salvaged timber. Among these images, Kren puts himself into two almost identical consecutive shots. Although the film is improvisatory and light in its concerns, the shots are again carefully framed, in this case so that the looming timber in the foreground, filmed from a low angle looking up, dwarfs the human subjects. This is a consistent feature of Kren's films, where people are often represented as machine or ant-like and miniaturised, viewed from a distance as quasi-alien beings, or are displaced into machines, as in the car in *Which Way to CA?*

41/82 Getting Warm, another film of beautiful colour, reprises the green and red theme of *17/68 Grün-Rot*, here through the framing of red-painted roof trusses carried by an identically coloured lifting truck, filmed against blue-green trees and sky, alternating with similarly toned interiors of people watching television. The theme develops through a variety of colour contrasts that increase in saturation before returning to a shot of a glorious red suburban sunset dotted by greenish neon signs in the dark middle ground.

43/84 1984, features Ronald Reagan in an interview, filmed off a television screen and superimposed in up to four layers. This is in keeping with Kren's consistent strategy of mediating his representations of humans one way or another, as in *28/73 Zeitaufnahmen*, a pixilated self-portrait in multiple layers, or the extreme close up re-filming of half-tone portraits in *2/60 48 Heads from the Zondi Test*. Even in *Auf der*

Pfaueninsel, where people are recorded in a relatively straightforward manner, the doubled shot of Brus disturbs the film's putative naturalism, while the rest of the family are filmed from behind.

In *44/85, Foot' - age shoot' - out*, Kren takes us from the inside of his fridge (which contains a variety of German and American products), into his hallway and out into downtown Houston. He makes some loose connections between US-European hybrids by juxtaposing the shots of Houston, a 'Western' city that could be anywhere, with Ennio Morricone's music for *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*: a fitting choice, as an exaggerated take on the strangeness of US culture, for what must have seemed an exotic landscape to a Middle European born between the two World Wars. By his own admission, Kren was unhappy with this film, having been pressurized into making it when he wasn't in the mood.

Kren's ten year period in the US was unarguably a low point in terms of his production as a whole, a sense reinforced by the fact that his last few films, made after his return to Vienna, are noticeably stronger and more purposeful. The American films are wistful, reflecting the melancholic passage of a drifter at large in an alien culture. For all their weaknesses though, they are never carelessly or thoughtlessly made. They evidence an eye ever receptive to formal possibilities and conjunctions, and they also express a sense of humour, which is more explicit here than in his major works.